DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 160 230 PS 010 158

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TITLE Tennessee Association on Young Children Public Policy Position Paper.
INSTITUTION Tennessee Association on Young Children, Knoxville.
PUB DATE 20 Oct 78
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Tennessee Association on Young Children (Knoxville, Tennessee, October 18-20, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Certification; *Child Care; *Child Welfare; Day Care Services; Early Childhood Education; *Guidelines; *Policy Formation; *Public Policy
IDENTIFIERS *Tennessee Association on Young Children

ABSTRACT

This paper states the position of the Tennessee Association for Young Children (TAYC) on public policies affecting young children. Eight general principles are listed: (1) legislative action should be based on accurate assessment of the current status of young children in Tennessee; (2) support should be given to children from nontraditional as well as traditional families; (3) policies should be designed to compliment rather than substitute for the child rearing responsibilities of families; (4) policies seeking to improve children's development should concentrate on the period from conception to school age; (5) parent and community participation should be mandated in publicly funded social service programs; (6) equal opportunity to benefit from services should be provided to all children regardless of sex, ethnic, religious or cultural background; (7) policies should be designed so that they can be fairly and uniformly enforced; and (8) regular evaluation should be made of the impact of policies on children and their families. Three policy issues to be addressed in 1979 are also discussed briefly: licensing of day care programs, government reorganization, and child care and preschool programs (Author/CM)

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October 20, 1978

TENNESSEE ASSOCIATION ON YOUNG CHILDREN

PUBLIC POLICY POSITION PAPER

prepared by
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The Tennessee Association on Young Children is a statewide organization of 600 members committed to the optimal development of children during the early, critical years of growth from birth to pre-adolescence. TAYC members represent a broad range of backgrounds and expertise, including day care staff, kindergarten and primary school teachers, social workers, physical and mental health specialists, state and regional social service administrators, nutritionists, higher education personnel, and other public and private citizens. The following statement of principles and policy issues was developed by the TAYC Public Policy Chairperson and a task force of TAYC members. This report was adopted as a statement of TAYC's position on policies affecting young children at the 1978 Annual Conference in Knoxville.

Statement of Principles

The following general principles are meant to serve as guiding statements that should provide direction to public policies affecting young children. These principles should be considered when policy issues are addressed by TAYC or when specific legislation or regulations are being reviewed.

1. Policy formulation should be based on an accurate assessment of the current status of young children in Tennessee. Information such as the number of children from birth to school age, the availability and cost of private and public child care services, the incidence of handicapping conditions in the preschool population, the status of children not living with their parents, the economic status of families with young children, and so on, should be collected by a designated state agency on a regular basis. This information should be made public and should serve as the basis for any legislative action that affects young children and their families.

2. Policies should be designed so that they do no harm to young children living in non-traditional families. Policies should seek to support not only traditional two-parent families, but should also support diverse family arrangements such as single-parent families or families with foster or adopted children.

3. Policies should be designed so that they can complement rather than substitute for the child rearing responsibilities of families. Families should always have the primary responsibility for raising children, and that responsibility should be supported by public policies. Only in clear cases of extreme abuse, neglect, or family disintegration should the government substitute for families' role in child development. Such support should be in the form of preventive, temporary assistance that will enable families to maintain independence and cohesion.

4. Policies that seek to improve children's development should concentrate on the period from conception to school age, with continuing but decreasing support into adolescence and adulthood. The education of potential parents and new parents should be emphasized so that parents may assume their caregiving roles with the knowledge necessary for independent, successful child rearing. A focus on the early years of development will assure an emphasis on preventive services.

5. Policies should be designed so that the participation of parents and other private citizens is required for planning, evaluation, and operation of publically funded social service programs. Parents should have the opportunity to serve as board members of public agencies, as advisors to policy makers, and as the primary provider of service where possible. Consumer participation in the design and delivery of services should be a central goal of public policies affecting young children.

6. Policies should require equal opportunity to benefit from services regardless of the sex, race, religion, place of residence, or handicapping condition of any child. As much as possible, services should be integrated on the basis of sex, race, class, and developmental abilities of children. Children should always have the opportunity to participate in the most normal, least restrictive settings, as close to the child's own home as possible. In addition, no child should be forced to participate in any social service unless otherwise indicated by Constitutional law or extreme cases of significant harm to the child in the absence of such service.

7. Policies should be designed so that they can be fairly and uniformly enforced. The development of regulations and the enforcement of those regulations should aim at the improvement of children's services. Those services unable to comply with regulations should be provided technical assistance and necessary financial support to help them come into compliance. Programs found to be continually harmful to children or that are unable to comply with regulations after an appropriate period should

not receive public funds, and, if necessary, should be prevented from operating. Policies and programs mandated by state and federal governments should be provided with funding adequate to meet the intent of such mandates.

8. Policies that affect young children should regularly be evaluated to determine their impact on children and families. Information should be collected by a designated state agency to determine the number of children affected by various public policies, the costs and benefits of those policies (both for the state and for the consumers of service), and any barriers to the implementation of services. This information on the impact of policies should be disseminated to the public and to members of the executive and legislative branches of government.

Policies Issues to be Addressed in 1979

I. Licensing of day care programs

Identified problems:

A. There are widespread inconsistencies in the interpretation and enforcement of the state day care licensing standards, primarily in the area of fire safety codes. This problem has led to the closing of several well-qualified centers and has discouraged the development of new programs in unserved regions of the state. The inconsistencies are especially evident 1) when the fire safety codes are applied to public schools compared to private agencies, and 2) when state-appointed regional inspectors enforce codes compared to city-appointed local inspectors. Part of the problem appears to result from the lack of trained, qualified inspectors hired for their professional competence rather than for political considerations.

B. The high cost of physical renovations required in private homes, churches, and community centers in order to comply with fire safety codes has inhibited the development of day care facilities. In addition, state and federal requirements for low adult-child ratios have increased the cost of providing services.

C. There are many unlicensed day care operators in Tennessee, some of whom are providing sub-standard care in crowded or inadequately equipped facilities. There are not enough licensing workers within DHS to locate these centers and provide assistance so they may come into compliance with licensing standards.

Suggested solutions:

A. Legislation should be introduced to revise present licensing regulations so that specific fire safety regulations are developed to be applied to family day care, group day care, and center-based care. The state should develop its own fire safety standards rather than continue to use the National Life Safety Code.

B. Specially-trained inspectors should be given responsibility for only day care licensing, and the qualifications of these inspectors should be based on knowledge of the environmental needs of young children rather than on political grounds.

C. The General Assembly should appropriate additional funds to expand the licensing and monitoring capacity of DHS. In addition, the General Assembly should direct state fire marshall personnel and DHS licensing personnel to work jointly to solve the issues discussed here.

II. Government reorganization

Identified problems:

A Those state agencies that have statutory responsibility for children's services have conflicting, overlapping, or ambiguous roles, leading to service gaps, the passing of children from agency to agency, and an inability of the public to monitor and evaluate the quality of services. This is due in part to the use of categorical labels that guide the allocation of funds rather than providing services based on the developmental needs of the child.

B. There is presently no long-range planning system at the state level to assure the coordination of programs and the efficient use of tax dollars for children's services.

Suggested solutions:

A. TAYC should prepare written testimony to present to the Subcommittee on Children's Services, now studying the feasibility of a new Department of Children's Services and related issues of coordination and duplication. The testimony should focus on 1) methods for increasing public input into long-range planning for social services, perhaps through

independent fact-finding bodies such as the present Commission on Children and Youth or the regional child development councils under the jurisdiction of the Office of Child Development, and 2) a system for inter-agency planning related to the needs of young children, recognizing that present inter-agency bodies have been inactive and ineffective in this area. The first priority of any long-range planning effort should be to clarify the roles and responsibilities of agencies serving children.

III. Child care and preschool programs

Identified problems:

A. There is a growing need for preschool children (birth to four years) and school age children (five to twelve years) to receive care outside their homes because of the increasing number of working mothers and single parent families.

B. The downward extension of educational services such as preschool and kindergarten programs has been influenced by the structure and content of elementary school curricula at the expense of meeting the total developmental needs of young children, especially in such areas as social-emotional growth, health and nutrition, and direct parental involvement in the child's education.

C. The trend to mainstream young handicapped children into regular preschool and day care settings is creating both positive and negative effects on the non-handicapped children in the class and increasing the responsibilities of the regular teacher.

Suggested solutions:

A. In order to assure the delivery of quality child care services to those who need them, incentives such as financial subsidies and the provision of technical assistance to new programs should be made available. Child care services should be available through a variety of settings in private agencies, public schools, non-profit community agencies, and should be provided in different forms such as family day care, center-based care, full day and half day care, etc. Tax credits should be available where relatives, friends, or neighbors care for children.

B. The competencies of those who specialize in working with preschool children should be judged on the basis of demonstrated learning and experience rather than acquisition of a particular

degree or elementary certification. These special competencies should be recognized through state-level endorsement of preschool teachers and child care workers who are providing comprehensive developmental services.

C. Where mainstreaming occurs, state educational policies should be revised to provide for reduced teacher-child ratios to assure the quality of services to both handicapped and non-handicapped children is maintained. In-service training on specific handicapping conditions should be available to preschool and kindergarten teachers who have handicapped children in their classes. Under existing state and federal law, the state Department of Education should be responsible for making such training available.

Comments and suggestions are welcome. Address them to:

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